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ON PAGE 50

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Security

Spy in the cab?

On July 15th, Mr Geoffrey Prime, a minicab driver from Cheltenham, appeared in Hereford magistrates court. He would not have merited a second glance but for the fact that for nine years, down to 1977, he was an employee at the government communications headquarters (GCHQ), Britain's largest intelligence organisation.

GCHQ is based in Cheltenham and works closely with Britain's allies, especially America. Mr Prime was charged with offences covered by section one of the Official Secrets Act 1911, the part which deals with espionage, as opposed to catch-all section two, which is intended to prevent anyone giving or receiving, without authorisation, any official information, whether classified or not. This fuelled rumours that a major spy scandal might be in the offing.

Cheltenham is a key part of Britain's security network. British codebreakers in world war two, then housed at Bletchley in Buckinghamshire, enabled Sir Winston Churchill and the chiefs of staff to read the minds of the men directing the Luftwaffe against British cities and the U-boats against her merchant marine. Mr Ronald Lewin, the most literate of Bletchley's chroniclers, has written:

The key concept was that of security; this whole operation trembled on a razor's edge, for if the Germans had come to believe that their most important ciphers were being broken the disaster for the British would have been immeasurable and perhaps final.

For Bletchley in 1942 read Cheltenham in 1982. The cabinet's overseas and defence committee depends on Cheltenham's network of listening posts for such information as the movements and intentions of the Warsaw pact, the secrets of diplomacy and what is happening in unstable parts of the world. One well-placed agent could compromise this effort. If Mr

Prime is found guilty, he will be the first spy from this branch of British intelligence to be convicted.

On July 16th, the Number 10 press office told journalists not to underestimate the Prime case. At Westminster excited MPs predicted a scandal of Kim Philby proportions. Mr Philby, formerly a Soviet mole inside the British secret intelligence service, defected in 1963 and is now a KGB general. On July 20th, however, the prime minister cooled the speculation by hinting in the house of commons that Mr Prime was a loner and not part of a spy ring. Sub judice rules prevented her from saying more.

GCHQ is responsible for making communications secure, as well as codebreaking. Its people sweep the cabinet room for bugs at regular intervals. During Sir Winston Churchill's last years as prime minister he was going a little deaf. So he had microphones installed around the cabinet table with a small amplifier and loudspeaker next to his chair to hear mumbling ministers. The first time the system was used was also the last. A radio cab (not Mr Prime's) driving down Whitehall picked up every word of the cabinet meeting. Recognising Sir Winston's growl the cabbie told the police and the microphones were ripped out. Time will tell if Cheltenham's second brush with a cab driver proved more damaging.